

Report on Happy Trails Barn Fire February 14th, 2014

by Founder/Executive Director, Annette Fisher

On Friday evening February 14th, Valentine's Day, a fire erupted in the Happy Trails goat and sheep barn. Staff member, Ashley Kloes, had just started her evening shift of feeding, watering and caring for the animals at the end of the day when she noticed smoke coming out of this barn. After discovering the barn was indeed on fire, she quickly called 911, made a report, and proceeded to get Natasha and Odessa, two permanent resident goats, out of the burning building. Myles, one of the barn cats, also ran out the open door to safety.



Ashley called me right away and after arriving at the sanctuary, I too tried to help rescue the other animals. Sadly the smoke and fire was too thick to reach the other two goats, pot belly pig, and rooster that lived on the right side of the barn.

While waiting for the fire department to arrive, Ashley and Happy Trails neighbor George Ritchie, caught Natasha and Odessa, the surviving goats, who were now loose in the side yard near the burning building. Holding them by the horns, they lead them to safety and placed them in a stall in the horse barn.

Fire fighters quickly arrived at the scene and began to fight the fire, which was constantly being fed by about 30 to 40 bales of hay that was stored in the barn. Our hearts broke as we watched the fire burn out of control while waiting for the fire fighters. I had never witnessed a burning building or experienced a

fire of this magnitude up close. The fire appeared to have a life of it's own, and large suspended circles of flames seemed to be rolling out from underneath the overhang of the building.

There was a helpless, sick feeling in the pit of my stomach knowing there wasn't anything we could do to help. Just then another barn cat slinked out of the open front door of the barn and collapsed against the side of the building. It was Lola. She didn't look very well, but the large wall of rolling flames under the overhang prevented us from going to her. Thankfully after she got her breath, she ran away from the building. A short while later we captured her and examined her, and she appeared to be fine, though somewhat shaken. A visit to the vet the following morning confirmed that she was not injured and did not have any burns, singed hair, or hurt paws. She needed a few days to rest from the smoke inhalation, but other than that she thankfully escaped the fire.



By the end of the evening, five fire trucks were on the scene to help battle the blaze. We are very grateful to the amazing fire fighters from Ravenna Township, City of Ravenna, Edinburg, and Brimfield. These brave guys cut holes in the roof of the building and placed ladders on the side of the building to make openings in the walls closer to the roof. Flames appeared out of hole, door and window, and the 30+ bales of hay that was stored in the building acted as an accelerant that kept the fire burning.

One by one, Happy Trails staff and many volunteers received

a call to report the devastating news. Though each of them asked if they should come to the sanctuary, everyone was given the same answer: *"You are welcome to come to the sanctuary if you feel drawn to be here, but there is really nothing anyone can do."* The damage was done and the firefighters were doing their job.

Time seemed to stand still for me personally, and the entire evening seemed surreal. It felt like only minutes had gone by since I made those calls to our staff and volunteers, but every time I turned around,

another friendly, worried face would appear through the smoky haze illuminated by the bright flashing fire truck lights. One by one, the entire team appeared, comforting each other and helping one another mourn the loss of the lives of the precious animals who could not be saved. Anywhere you walked on the property was another caring soul. These are the type of people who didn't even need to ask, "*What can we do?*" They are so connected to each other that they instinctively knew the right things to say and how to bring peace and healing to the scene. Before the fire was even completely extinguished, the healing process had begun.



By the time the firefighters were satisfied that there would be no more eruptions of fire, it was very late in the evening. We sloshed through hundreds, if not thousands, of gallons of water which was now running across the ground and mixing with the snow. It was only going to be a matter of time before the entire area turned into a skating rink. By now several hours had passed since the fire began. Within this very short time period lives were lost, lives were saved, and lives were touched in a big way. We then stood in the warm glow of the fire truck lights staring vacantly at the mist of vapor hanging around the now completely destroyed building. Our team gathered and the question needed addressed: *What do we*

do tonight for the animals who lost their lives? A late-night call placed to a great friend, Sarah Aitken with Hummel Pet Cremation Services, enabled us to take the animals who perished in the fire to the crematory immediately.



Everyone worked together. Our group slowly went into the soaked, steaming building, and volunteers very respectfully took blankets and covered the bodies of the two goats, Serena and Venus; the pot belly pig, Rico Suave; and Jason the rooster. With the team nearby, Happy Trails Board Members Kerry Jackson and Kevin Bragg carefully picked up the covered goats one at a time and gently placed them in wheelbarrows

in order to get them through the rubble inside the barn. Rico the pig was fairly small, and Kevin tucked the blanket in close around the little guy and carefully held him in his arms as he carried him outside.

Jason the rooster, too, was carefully blanketed and held respectfully as a volunteer removed him from his cage and carried him out the door. Once outside the barn, volunteer Bentley Hudson was waiting with the skidsteer to help transport the animals past the



fire trucks to the front of the sanctuary. There they would be moved into the Happy Trails logo truck for transport to Hummel. Walt and Kevin made the late-night drive with the animals to Hummel Pet Crematory Services in Copley, and helped provide a sense of closure for everyone.

During all the commotion, the other animals at the sanctuary were still waiting to be fed. Staff members and volunteers worked together to make sure everyone else had food, water and dry bedding before being able to complete what was a terribly long, stressful and heart-wrenching night.

THE DAY AFTER

The following day everyone dealt with grief in various ways. Our regular Saturday work crew arrived at the sanctuary to clean shelters as usual, though this time with heavy hearts. In the middle of the day, a special thing that happened brightened everyone's spirits and reminded us all what Happy Trails is all about. Two young bulls calves named Nelson and Gunther who had come into our program from two separate rescues, had been suffering from severe malnutrition. They had been kept in different areas for quarantine purposes to help prevent them from spreading their upper respiratory disease and pneumonia-like symptoms



to each other. This past week, both calves were strong enough and healthy enough to be castrated (neutered). On Saturday, they were able to meet each other for the first time, with a crowd of volunteers standing by to witness this next step in their recovery — finally getting to become buddies! Not long

after they met, the two boys became fast friends, never leaving each other's side. (We'll try to post a video of this heart-warming meeting soon.) Tears of sadness now mixed with tears of joy as everyone's heart went out to these two adorable steers who were each so excited about their new found companionship with each other.

FRIDAY EVENING ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like send out a few acknowledgments:

- Ashley Kloes is the Happy Trails Animal Care Giver staff member who discovered the fire when she began her evening care shift. Because of her quick thinking and immediate call to 911, the fire departments got there in time to contain the fire to the one building and prevent it from spreading to other nearby barns, thus saving many more lives. She saved the lives of two icons at Happy Trails, Natasha and Odessa the goats, who are known by many for their work as representatives of Happy Trails. These goats are known for their roles in the Farm Animal Visitation Program where they visit residents of nursing homes, and they attend community events and educational presentations at schools. Everyone is grateful to have these two precious souls still with us. And we are very grateful to Ashley for getting the doors opened that saved Myles and Lola, our beloved barn cats.
- I'd like to recognize our combined team of staff members, volunteers and board members who dropped everything to come out to the sanctuary simply to be there with each other and to lend their support: Staff members **Ashley Ehmann, Ilona Urban, and Laurie Jackson**; Board Members **Kerry Jackson, Walt Shields, and Kevin Bragg**; and volunteers **Cindy Dilley, Jason Wolboldt, Bentley Hudson, Dave Robinson, George Richie and Barb Bakaletz**. Friday was also Laurie's birthday. Because Laurie and Kerry are such caring and thoughtful people, they immediately abandoned their night-out plans and arrived at Happy Trails to be there with all of us.
- Thanks to the media who have reached out to us, visited Happy Trails in the several days following the story, and covered the situation with great respect: At this time we have been worked with Channel 8 Fox News; Channel 19 News; Channel 27/33 News; Ray Horner Morning Show at WAKR news radio; Mary Ann Graff and Doug James, morning show hosts of K105FM; Donna Miller at the Cleveland Plain Dealer; and Kathy Antoniotti at the Akron Beacon Journal.
- Simple things meant a lot Friday evening. Thanks to the neighbors who let our staff and volunteers park in their driveway since parking was not allowed on the street.
- The sheriff's department helped direct traffic safely, and at the end of the evening, the county sent a salt truck to make sure that the road in front of the sanctuary was not icy. Many thanks to all these folks.

FAQ's

Q. How can we help?

A. The simple answer would be to help us fill the seats for the upcoming fundraiser in March that was already being planned before the fire broke out. This fundraiser will now be more important than ever, with additional funds being needed to make repairs and facility upgrades. The March event is called "A Night of Hope and Inspiration", which is something I think we all need right now. Details of this very special fundraiser can be found on the website at www.happytrailsfarm.org. By purchasing a ticket and

attending our event, you will be showing your support and will be in the company of some amazing people that evening.

But the question “*How can we help*” is a bit of a challenge for us to answer in any other way. We are assessing the needs of the sanctuary, and are making plans to not only rebuild the barn that was destroyed, but the fire made us realize there are other areas we need to address as well. We may not rebuild the exact same barn in order to help us create a fresh, new start in that area. A new look or new dimensions may help to heal old wounds.

But we also realized the need for a few other crucial changes. We had originally planned for construction of the new covered arena to take place in February. When the fire occurred, we realized that had the covered arena been in place, the fire trucks would not have been able to make the sharp turn to get back to the buildings at the far end of the property. The actual location of where the covered arena will be built cannot be moved, which leaves us no alternative than to move the shelter known as the old pot belly pig barn. The shelter is not in the best of shape and we had hoped to tear it down this year and to replace it. Now that plan is a necessity, not a wish, and we will need to construct a different pot belly pig barn elsewhere on the property. This will allow us to make the driveway wide enough for fire trucks to safely and easily maneuver their way to the back of the property. So the needs are many, but also a bit complicated as we re-vamp the layout of some of the driveways and buildings. Which brings us back to our simple answer regarding how to help at this time — **attending our already-planned March fundraiser would be the perfect way to show your support and help us raise additional funds for the sanctuary.**

THANK YOU TO ALL SUPPORTERS

- We have absolutely overwhelmed with the goodness of people not only from Ohio but from other states as well who heard the news of the fire. We are doing our very best to return phone calls, emails, texts and messages, and to answer all questions and to contact everyone individually. This may take us a bit of time, so we appreciate your patience. We are so blessed to be surrounded by caring and loving people, and folks who want to see the sanctuary succeed and recover so that we in turn can provide peace and healing for more farm animals and horses who are victims of abuse and neglect.

- To our fellow animal-rescue workers at other humane agencies — we are amazed at how many humane societies and rescue groups that Happy Trails serves are reaching out to us, hosting fundraisers, and offering their help in any way. We are beyond grateful to know that the services we provide others are appreciated and acknowledged.

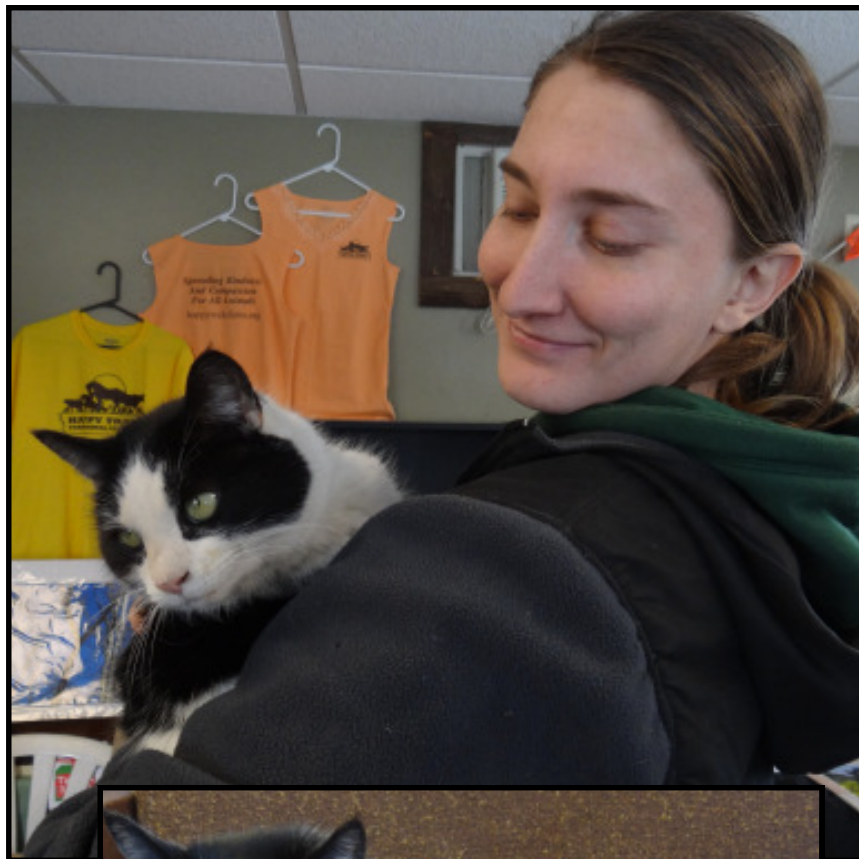
- **To everyone who is sending in donations toward the reconstruction and renovation — know that we will be good stewards of these funds and that they will be used wisely and carefully. We thank you for this support.**

INSURANCE

As far as the building itself goes, the insurance company stated that an adjuster will be in touch with us



soon to visit the site. All Happy Trails buildings are insured, but there are most likely deductibles and expenses that may not be covered by the insurance. We can provide more information on this as events unfold and we receive confirmation from the insurance agency. Tangible items that we lost in the fire include about five or so extra large (dog) pet porters that we used to transport smaller farm animals such as pot belly pigs, small goats, lambs, baby farm pigs and poultry; a ladder; several heated water buckets; about 30 to 40 bales of hay; a heavy-duty swimming pool used for the ducks during warm weather; tools like pitchforks and stall picks and rakes; hay racks; a metal cage; and more misc. items. In order to rebuild, we also need to address the site requirements such as providing a level surface and base gravel, and to look closely at the integrity of the current well pump that was next to the burning building.



(top right) Ashley Ehmann holds Myles, one of two barn cats who survived the fire.



Natasha the goat, standing on top of her jungle gym on a happier, warmer day.

ANIMAL SURVIVORS

We are extremely grateful for the animal's lives that were saved. Natasha and Odessa the goats are permanent residents at Happy Trails and have brought great joy to many people, including nursing home residents. Natasha was found on the side of the road in Summit County when she was only a day and a half old. Odessa survived a hideous situation at a livestock farm in



Medina County, and had to have her left eye surgically removed at Ohio State University in Columbus.

Myles the cat and his feline gal pal, Lola, own the sanctuary as cats often do, and can be seen wondering around the property at any given time. These two beautiful black and white cats keep an eye on everything and supervise the volunteers and staff as they go about their day.

Ashley Kloes hugs Odessa, one of two goats who survived the fire.

MEMORIAL TO THOSE WE LOST

Venus and Serena were newer members at Happy Trails also. These lovely lady goats had tested positive for CAE, a debilitating goat disease that can be transferred from one goat to another. For this reason they were kept separate from the other permanent resident goats and had their own private area of the barn. They were not up for adoption quite yet because their court case was still pending.



Rico Suave, a small pig male piggy, was a newer resident at Happy Trails He had been discovered as a stray pig in the Copley area. After being at Happy Trails for several weeks and no-one stepping forward to claim the pig, this intact male was taken to the vet and neutered. Rico was in the goat/sheep barn in an isolated recovery stall so that he could heal and recover by himself while the neuter took effect before he could be placed



with the other family of pot bellies. To be honest, we all looked to see who had good pictures of the sweet little guy. Unfortunately because he was always so busy humping everything from the hay bales to his food bowl, we did not have any really great photos of this precious little man.

Jason the rooster seemed to have some emotional issues that he was dealing with after he survived being a part of the evil world of cockfighting. He did not do great in the rooster barn with all other hens and roosters. He would pace frantically and wear his feathers off his chest. He seemed to be more at peace being the only chicken in the area, thus resulting in his relocation to the goat/sheep barn, where he seemed to enjoy the company of his goat and pig friends.

MORE TO COME

As more details become available, we will do our best to continue to post updates and provide news about the recovery and progress here at the sanctuary. Please know how much we appreciated each and every one of you and your support during this most difficult of times. Many thanks.

*With kindness and compassion
for all animals,*

Annette

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